

Local Wildlife Sites – South East Wales Project

The following information outlines the best practice guidelines for managing the habitat type listed below in a manner that is sympathetic to wildlife. It is part of a series relating to various habitat types and management issues that have been produced by your local Wildlife Trusts.

No.13 Invasive Weed Control (Natives)

What are Native Invasive Weeds?

- These are naturally occurring, native plant species that have an important role in the ecosystem and as such should generally be left as part of the diversity of a site, however under certain circumstances they can become problematic.
- The species specifically addressed by this document are Thistles (Creeping & Spear), Docks (Broad-leaved & Curled) and Common Ragwort. These five species are perennial making them more difficult to eradicate, particularly as with the exception of Creeping Thistle they all produce large amounts of fertile seed which can survive for considerable periods in the soil-bank. Creeping Thistle, produces seed but a limited amount is fertile, it compensates for this by reproducing via a creeping root system making it a particularly fast spreading and difficult species to control.



Creeping Thistle



Common Ragwort



Dock

Why do they need to be controlled?

- Creeping Thistle, Spear Thistle, Broad-leaved Dock, Curled Dock and Common Ragwort are all covered by the Weeds Act 1959. This legislation was brought in not to preserve wildlife habitats, but to prevent the agricultural value of land being devalued. The legislation states it is not an offence to have these “weeds” growing on your land, however they must not be allowed to spread to agricultural land, particularly grazing areas or land which is used to produce conserved forage.
- Also when occurring in the “wrong” place and in abundance they can have a negative impact upon important wildlife habitats, particularly grasslands.
- It is the case therefore that controlling these species to conserve valuable wildlife habitats can have agricultural benefits and ensure legislation is complied with.
- For advice on the control of non-native (alien) species such as Japanese Knotweed please refer to the separate Toolkit No. 14. Additionally Bracken control, despite being a native species is addressed within a separate Toolkit (No. 12) also.

Management Recommendations

The control of the aforementioned weeds can be achieved by a number of means with the best methodology altering dependent on the species involved and the nature of the site. Particular care and consideration needs to be given to the best method of control when the site has high ecological value as it needs to be ensured that there is no resultant harm to valuable wildlife.

The following is recommended to ensure invasive weed species do not negatively impact upon the wildlife and economic value of your grassland:

Prevention

- **Prevention is better than cure. It is far better not to give opportunity for these species to gain a foothold in the first place.**
- **To do this the aim is to maintain a well-managed perennial sward without gaps, avoid overgrazing (especially in winter) and poaching which opens up gaps in the sward into which thistles, dock and ragwort can spread.**

Control

Thistles

It should be borne in mind that there are a number of species of thistle, most of which are not a problem and should be maintained. It is only Creeping Thistle and Spear Thistle that require control. This can be achieved as follows:

- **Cutting**
 - ❖ This can be undertaken with a scythe or strimmer.
 - ❖ Timing is very important with the cut being done when the flower is still in bud but turned purple. This will maximise the resources taken from the plant but precede it setting seed.
 - ❖ All the cuttings should be removed.
- **Digging out**
 - ❖ For Spear Thistle use a spade to dig out the root and destroy the rosette.
 - ❖ This should not be used for Creeping Thistle as it will only help to spread the plant.
- **Herbicide**
 - ❖ Spot Herbicide with "**roguing glove**". - This is suitable for small areas and each thistle is hand-wiped individually in May/June well before they flower.
 - ❖ Spot herbicide with **knapsack sprayer**. - This is better suited if there are dense concentrated stands of thistle and is again best undertaken in May/June. Great care needs to be taken to avoid drift or leak of spray as herbicides are likely to kill non-target valuable plants as well.
 - ❖ **Weed-wiper** -. This is suitable for more badly infested fields. It is recommended that the field is grazed down to a lower level prior to application so that the weed-wiper only impacts on the taller thistles. This like other herbicide treatments is best carried out in May-June.

To be most effective a combined regime of cutting and herbicide treatment is likely to be required and this needs to be associated with improved management in the long-term.

Common Ragwort

It should be borne in mind that there are a number of species of ragwort as well as closely related or similar looking plants which are not a problem and should be maintained.

Even the Common Ragwort is not a problem species in terms of its impact on wildlife, indeed it is a vital species for a number of invertebrates such as the Cinnabar Moth. It is generally only a problem in terms of wildlife where its presence prevents the effective grazing or hay-production required to maintain the habitat. This is because Common Ragwort presents a poisoning risk to livestock. Should Common Ragwort need to be controlled to allow either hay-making or grazing the following are potential control methods:

- **Pulling**

- ❖ This can prevent seed spread and can give long-term control although any root fragments not removed can produce weak growth.
- ❖ Hand pulling (wearing suitable gloves) is appropriate for smaller areas. On larger areas the use of machine pulling should be considered (care needs to be taken as machinery can damage grassland, particularly as disturbed ground may lead to Ragwort spread). Machine pulling requires a height difference between the ragwort and other plants and is only suitable on certain soil types and topographies.
- ❖ A combination of manual/mechanical pulling can be effective against ragwort, if repeated over a number of years, without having to resort to herbicides.
- ❖ Ragwort which has been removed should be carefully disposed of to prevent re-seeding.

- **Herbicides**

- ❖ These can be an effective way of treating ragwort but considerable care must be taken to avoid herbicides affecting the other valuable wildflowers in the grassland.
- ❖ Spot-treatment taking great care over the application is the best way to achieve this.

- **Cutting**

- ❖ This can be used but it is a last resort where other control methods cannot be used.
- ❖ This is because cutting stimulates growth and plants subsequently re-flower later in the season and in subsequent years if cut again whereas normally the plant will die after 2 years following seeding.
- ❖ Cut plants need to be removed as they are more palatable to livestock but have the same poisoning issues.

Docks

It should be borne in mind that there are a number of species of docks, most of which are not a problem and should be maintained. It is only Curled and particularly Broad-leaved Dock that require control. These are the species most likely to be encountered in the grasslands but should not be confused with the closely related Common Sorrel which is also likely to occur.

The following are potential control methods:

- **Cutting**
 - ❖ This can be undertaken with a scythe or strimmer.
 - ❖ Timing is important with the cut being done well before the plant sets seed.
 - ❖ All the cuttings should be removed.
- **Herbicide**
 - ❖ Spot Herbicide with “**roguing glove**”. - This is suitable for small areas and each dock is hand-wiped individually well before they flower.
 - ❖ Spot herbicide with **knapsack sprayer**. – This is better suited if there are dense concentrated stands of dock and is best undertaken in May/ June. Great care needs to be taken to avoid drift or leak of spray as herbicides are likely to kill non-target valuable plants as well.
- **Digging**
 - ❖ This is not ideal as new Dock plants can easily grow from small pieces of root.

Docks are particularly associated with areas of nutrient enrichment and soil disturbance so can be prevalent around feeding areas and drinking troughs. It may be advisable to situate these in close proximity to already disturbed/infested areas such as gateways to concentrate infestations in a limited area to preserve the rest of the field.

Should you require any further advice regarding the management of your Local Wildlife Site please do not hesitate to contact your local Wildlife Trust:

Gwent Wildlife Trust

Tel: 01600 740600

e-mail: info@gwentwildlife.org

Wildlife Trust of South & West Wales

Tel: 01656 724100

e-mail: info@welshwildlife.org

Other toolkits available are:

No.1 Neutral Grassland (Hay Meadow)
No.2 Neutral Grassland (Pasture)
No.3 Acid Grassland
No.4 Calcareous Grassland
No.5 Marshy Grassland
No.6 Marsh Grassland (with Marsh Fritillary)
No.7 Heath

No.8 Hedgerows
No.9 Saltmarsh & Coastal Grazing Marsh
No.10 Ponds & Lakes
No.11 Scrub control
No.12 Bracken control
No.14 Invasive weed control (aliens – Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam etc.)

Further useful documents include:

- ❖ Weeds Act 1959: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/7-8/54/contents
- ❖ Ragwort Control Act 2003 : <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/40/contents>
- ❖ General advice: <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-pets/wildlife/management/weeds/weedscontrol.htm>

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